

AMERICA'S COPPER COINAGE 1783-1857



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The Long Tradition

The copper coin played a pivotal role in our early national history, and it still occupies a prominent place in our affections. From the time that the first federal Mint opened its doors in 1793 to the present, copper coinage of some sort—half cents and cents down to 1857, cents since that time—have been struck in every year, and the lowly cent bears dates for all of those years except one. No 1815-dated cents exist, but a few cents were struck late that year, dated *1816*.

The federal copper coinage introduced in 1793 had many predecessors. There were issues of the individual states in the 1780s, most of whose homemade origins were betrayed by their rough finish, less-than-artistic designs. There were tokens, most imported from England. There were privately produced pattern coins and regular contract issues, produced on behalf of the infant United States in England and, on at least one occasion, in the United States itself. And there were out-and-out counterfeits, fakes which circulated alongside more legitimate issues: people were hungry for small change, and a counterfeit was better than no coin at all.

We shall be examining the long and rich tradition of early American copper coinage through the medium of these color images. A brief bibliography is appended, for it is impossible to give more than a taste of the complexity of the series in the confines of a single set of slides. Consider it, rather, as an introduction to a complex and fascinating series—and as an invitation to learn more about it.

UNITED STATES

Nova Constellatio copper, 1783

The Nova Constellatio coppers dated 1783 and 1785 are among the earliest distinctly American copper coins to circulate in the infant United States. We can call them "American" because of their decidedly native designs, with the Latin reference to a "new constellation"—referring of course to the United States—and the prominent U.S. (frequently intertwined) on the reverse.

Not that these coins were made in the United States. They were manufactured on the home ground of the recent enemy, England, the products of a Birmingham coiner named Thomas Wyon. They were ordered as a speculative venture by Gouverneur Morris, Assistant Superintendent of Finance at the time. As Morris was involved in a scheme to set up an American mint to strike silver coins with approximately the same designs, the Nova Constellatio coppers are frequently said to be patterns—which they are not. Rather, Morris intended them to supply his fellow citizens with small change during a difficult period, and there is every evidence that they did so.

**TWO VIEWS OF AMERICA:
Immunis Columbia, 1787
Inimica Tyrranis America, 1785**

As Americans were developing a concept of copper coinage in the 1780s, they were also developing an idea as to the meaning of America. Much blood and treasure had been expended in order to eject England and the tyrannical George III from these shores. What was the new America like? The question was debated on two rare coppers of the 1780s.

The piece on the left is known as the *Immunis Columbia*. Designed by James F. Atlee, it was struck by the ubiquitous coiners of Machin's Mills. America (or Columbia) is mistress of her own house, immune from the problems of the outer world. She bears a Liberty cap on a pole in one hand, a scale in the other, Atlee's way of saying that she was the defender of liberty and justice in an unfriendly world.

On the other piece, she is represented as the enemy of tyrants—an obvious reference to her recent adversaries. Note the Liberty cap atop the column. Note also America's foot, which rests atop a crown. Taken along with the bow, arrows, and spear, there can be little doubt as to how this designer (perhaps George Wyon) viewed the identity of the new country. The other side of this pattern coin has the legend *CONFEDERATIO* (a reference to the confederation of the states), and the piece is usually known as a *Confederatio* copper.

MASSACHUSETTS

Cent, 1787

We can call these coins "cents" as opposed to "coppers" because the coins themselves bore that designation, the earliest American coins to do so.

Unlike other state copper coinage, these pieces were actually struck by a state rather than for one: Massachusetts elected to organize its own mint rather than to depend on contractors. This decision was reached late in 1786; by the following May, Massachusetts had appointed a Boston goldsmith named Joshua Wetherle to head the enterprise. Wetherle set to work, and the first Massachusetts cents (and half cents, with essentially identical designs) entered circulation later that year. Coinage continued through much of 1788.

Joseph Callender engraved the dies for early Massachusetts cents and half cents. He was later joined by Jacob Perkins, whose products can be distinguished by their peculiar form of the S, which tends to look like an 8. The designs themselves were spelled out in detail by the state legislature on June 27, 1787, and they represent a break with those seen on other state issues. Consciously American, they also feature legends in English rather than in Latin. This choice of language was intended to emphasize the fact that this coinage represented a break with the past—as did America herself.

MASSACHUSETTS

Half cent, 1787

This well designed coin enjoys several distinctions. It is our first half cent, struck fully six years before the denomination made its debut at our national Mint. Moreover, in its use of the words HALF CENT (seen on the eagle's breast), it and its companion cent were the first American coins whose values were expressed in this new, still unofficial denomination. Finally, Massachusetts half cents and cents were the only state coinages actually to be struck at a state-owned mint: one was set up in Boston in 1787, and it was in operation during that year and the year following.

CONNECTICUT Copper, 1785

A number of coiners worked for the state of Connecticut between 1785 and 1788. Unlike the issues of New Jersey and Massachusetts, which featured new, unfamiliar designs, the Connecticut coiners took no chances. They wanted their products to be as readily accepted as the earlier English halfpennies of George II and George III, so they employed designs which were close copies of the British ones: a head on the obverse, a seated female figure on the reverse, with the date below.

But they did change the legends. The obverse informs us as to the identity of the issuing authority: AUCTORI CONNEC (by the authority of the State of Connecticut), while the reverse legend INDE ET LIB, expressed the hopes of a new state and a new nation for freedom and independence.

CONNECTICUT

Coppers, 1786, 1787, 1788

Connecticut's coins are the most plentiful of the early state issues. A number of contractors were involved, and the coins were produced in at least two places (New Haven, Connecticut and Morristown, New Jersey). Dozens of die varieties exist (many dies were needed in part because, due to inferior technology and steel, dies wore out rapidly), and millions of coppers were eventually produced.

Illustrated here are coins of 1786, 1787, and 1788. As you can see, they followed the basic design guidelines already laid down for the first issue of 1785. These coins look worn to the untrained eye. But in point of fact, they are among the best preserved Connecticut cents. Faulty die work, inadequate striking pressure, and bad planchets account for the shop-worn look of these coins.

NEW YORK

Copper, 1787

Although the state of New York never formally contracted for an issue of copper coinage, several coiners assumed that such a contract would eventually materialize, and they struck coppers for the state all the same. Two mints struck most of these unauthorized copper coins. One, located in New York City, featured John Bailey and Ephraim Brasher (who is better known for his famous gold doubloon) as its principals. The other was Machin's Mills, a semi-clandestine operation near the town of Newburgh. Set up by Captain Thomas Machin in 1786, Machin's Mills struck coppers for New Jersey and Vermont in addition to coins for New York. They also produced imitation English halfpennies in large quantities.

The coin pictured was made by the first firm. Brasher and Bailey. The designs resemble those of the earlier English halfpenny, doubtless intended to ensure the coins' circulation in the new United States. Legends were changed, however: the obverse bears the Latin for the name of the state, while the reverse reads VIRT ET LIB, for Virtue and Liberty, assumed to have been achieved as a result of the War for Independence.

NEW JERSEY

Copper, 1786

A number of private mints were used to strike copper coinage for the state of New Jersey, and issues are known for 1786, 1787, and 1788. Large numbers were struck—along with Connecticut issues of the same period, these are the most common pre-federal coins.

The first New Jersey coppers were struck at Rahway. Facilities in Morristown, Elizabethtown, New York City, and Machin's Mills later joined in producing this coinage. Striking continued well into 1789, although no issues dated 1789 are known. Presumably, the new federal Constitution (which, unlike the Articles of Confederation, did *not* give the states the right to make their own money) convinced the Jersey coiners that it would be wiser to backdate their last issues. These were the first American coins to bear the national motto and the shield of the United States.

NEW JERSEY

Copper, 1788

The final issue of New Jersey coppers is dated 1788, although its manufacture continued through part of 1789. For legal reasons, New Jersey coiners probably decided to retain the 1788 date on these last coins.

There is great consistency among New Jersey issues; these coins followed design stipulations laid down at the beginning of the series, back in 1786. A number of people were responsible for the coins of 1788, among them John Bailey, Ephraim Brasher's partner. And many mints coined these last New Jersey issues: as well as Bailey's facility in New York, a mint in Morristown, New Jersey and another in Elizabethtown shared responsibility for them.

The importance of New Jersey's copper coinage may be indicated by the fact that the national motto and the national shield, introduced on this state's coins in 1786, were soon carried over to federal coinage, dominating the reverses of most national gold and silver issues until the beginning of the twentieth century.

VERMONT

Copper, 1785

In the middle 1780s, several states issued copper coins. So did a *country*—Vermont. Due to a land dispute with New York, Vermont remained outside of the Union until 1791. But its people were as short of small change as were those of the United States and so, in 1785, local authorities commissioned a contract coinage.

That June, one Reuben Harmon, Jr. of the town of Rupert, was given an exclusive right to mint money for the Vermont Republic over the next two years. Unable to meet demand for copper coins, Harmon and his partners, William Coley and Daniel Van Vorhis, soon had to subcontract part of the coinage to other people, a group centered at Machin's Mills, near Newburgh, New York.

The first Vermont coppers featured a "landscape" design for the obverse, with the name of the country in Latin. An eye surrounded by fourteen stars adorned the reverse, with the legend STELLA QUARTA DECIMA. This alluded to Vermont's desire to become the fourteenth state (or star), provided that New York settled the land dispute in Vermont's favor.

VERMONT

Coppers, 1786, 1788

The "landscape" design used for the first Vermont coppers proved unpopular because it was unfamiliar. In the latter part of 1786, it was abandoned, and a second design, based on the popular English halfpenny, was adopted in its place.

The first coin with the new design is illustrated at the left. It is also called the "Baby Head" for obvious reasons, and it and its accompanying reverse (not seen here) share the dubious distinction of being the most wretched coinage designs in our history.

Later issues, those of 1787 and 1788, were somewhat improved. The 1788 copper at the right might be mistaken for a contemporary English halfpenny—were it not too light and were there any English halfpennies dated 1788! The bottom coin dates from the same year. All of these later issues bore a seated figure on the reverse (representative of the country) with the same reverse legend seen earlier on the Connecticut issues: IN-DE ET LIB.

MACHIN'S MILLS

Counterfeit halfpenny, 1787

The middle and late 1780s were years of monetary diversity, experimentation, and confusion. Nowhere was this more evident than in copper coinage. People continued to use pre-Revolutionary British halfpennies. States coined copper, or had others strike it for them. The federal government had a contract copper coinage, the Fugio issue of 1787. Speculative pieces came over from England. And counterfeit coins abounded.

These fakes tended to resemble the old British halfpennies of the early 1770s. Some came from England, but others were made here. For American-made counterfeit coppers, the firm of Machin's Mills, located outside the present-day town of Newburgh, was the acknowledged leader in the field. The copper seen here is a typical product of the firm, which also produced some more legitimate coinage for the states of New York and New Jersey and the Vermont Republic.

THREE EARLY TOKENS:

Bar "cent," c. 1785

Albany Church penny, 1790

Auctori Plebis token, "1787"

If copper coinage was in short supply in the 1780s and 1790s, in terms of the amounts in actual circulation, the number of *types* of pieces seeing commerce was large. Three are illustrated here, all of them tokens.

The first appeared in circulation in New York late in 1785. The workmanship would indicate that it originated in England, even though the obverse design was probably copied from a Continental Army button. The piece's name comes from the thirteen parallel horizontal bars on the reverse, representing the thirteen states.

Next to it is a penny token issued in 1790 by the First Presbyterian Church of Albany, New York. A thousand of these pieces were issued by exasperated religious authorities, who were tired of waiting for decent copper coin from their state or nation.

Little is known about the Auctori Plebis token, although it was probably struck in England, perhaps in the mid-1790s. At first glance, its obverse looks like a Connecticut product, with AUCTORI PLEBIS ("by the authority of the people") substituted for AUCTORI CONNEC ("by the authority of the State of Connecticut"). But its reverse, seen here, closely copies an English token of 1793. A fairly common piece, its status must remain conjectural.

NEW YORK TOKENS:

Mott token, 1789

Talbot, Allum & Lee token, 1794

Throughout the days of the Confederation, and well into those of the government which succeeded it, copper tokens played an essential role in providing small change. We are apt to assume that, with the establishment of the Philadelphia Mint in 1793, our copper coinage shortage was solved overnight. But the quick appearance of Hard Times tokens in the late 1830s should tell us that official copper was in scant supply in normal times, if it became so easily nonexistent at the first sign of economic distress.

Illustrated are tokens from the 1780s and 1790s. They would have done some service as a halfpence under the old monetary system, as cents under the new. The Mott token is said to have been made in England, although no coiner responsible for it has ever been identified. It may in fact have been made here.

The other token is definitely of English manufacture, made for an importing firm located in lower Manhattan. Issues are known for 1794 and 1795, and many of them achieved a special numismatic significance, as they were bought by the Mint, cut down, and recoinced as half cents in 1795 and succeeding years.

UNITED STATES

Washington cent (small eagle), 1791

In 1789, with the ratification of our present Constitution, a new form of federal government was installed with a new leader, President George Washington. Washington, hero of the American Revolution, was so popular a leader that, when serious discussion began over a new coinage for the United States, it was earnestly debated whether or not Washington's head should adorn the obverse of the new coinage. To many Americans, this seemed the most natural thing in the world. To others, including the general himself, his head on the coinage would bear an uncomfortable resemblance to royalty—and we all know what had happened to George III when he placed his head on the coinage!

So the idea was dropped. When the first American coins (copper cents and half cents) appeared in 1793, they bore a head of Liberty. But prior to that, two varieties of pattern cents were prepared for us in England, using Washington's portrait for the obverse, and a large or small American eagle for the reverse; the small eagle design is illustrated here. A fair number of these pieces exist, struck in the hopes of persuading Congress members to adopt the designs—and to let Obediah Westwood's Mint in Birmingham, England, strike them. These hopes fell through; the patterns remain.

UNITED STATES

Washington cent (trial piece), 1791

Today, dies for coins are mass-produced by the process called *hubbing*. A master die, featuring all elements to be present on the final coin, is placed in a hydraulic press. Under great pressure, its designs are forced into steel die blanks. These blanks (which will now have the designs of the master die raised in relief) will then be used to produce working dies.

This process was only perfected in the twentieth century. Earlier, major designs were sunk into working dies by hand, and the letters of the legends were applied by hand as well. This process necessitated the taking of trial impressions from the dies from time to time, to see how things were going.

On this slide, we see such an impression from an unfinished reverse die. Forming part of the British-made Washington cent series, this piece's die had the main design elements applied, but it still lacked the words ONE CENT, to be applied over the eagle's head. the edge lettering on this piece indicates that the planchet had begun as one of John G. Hancock's token issues for John Wilkinson, the foremost British industrialist of the late eighteenth century, but had provided instead a handy place to try out this unfinished reverse die. Presumably, this resulting trial strike is unique.

UNITED STATES

Fugio Cent, 1787

By 1787, the United States still had no national mint. Many in Congress had become alarmed at the profusion of lightweight state copper coins, however, and it was determined that the federal government would contract for a national copper issue, whose full weight would be a standard against which other peoples' copper would be judged. The result was the Fugio cent, so called because of the Latin word FUGIO ("I fly") seen on the obverse. The design (and the motto) were first suggested by Benjamin Franklin, as was the interlocking ring design on the reverse. In homage to him, the coins are sometimes referred to as Franklin cents.

The Fugio cent was never as successful as desired. James Jarvis, who was making copper coinage for the state of Connecticut at the time, was chosen to undertake this national coinage. Jarvis was unable to fulfill his contract, in part because he was using some of the copper given to him by the government to manufacture coins for his own activities. In any event, the Fugios he made turned out to be almost as underweight as the state coppers they were designed to replace. Jarvis lost his contract, and very nearly landed in prison; he evaded the latter by leaving the country. He had managed to coin about 400,000 Fugio cents, but many of them never got into circulation. The rampant mismanagement of the Fugio affair helped convince the national government that, like it or not, a federal mint would be necessary.

UNITED STATES Cent, 1793

The Mint Act, passed by Congress on April 2, 1792, established an official American copper coin, to be called a cent. It also called for the construction of a National Mint in Philadelphia to strike this and other coins stipulated in the Act.

Three kinds of cents (we call these early coppers "large" cents to distinguish them from later issues after 1857) appeared in the first year of Mint operation, 1793. The coins pictured were in the first group, called "chain" cents, because of the reverse design.

They were never popular. Their designer, who was probably Henry Voigt, does not seem to have been comfortable with the deep engraving needed for coin dies. His obverse design was criticized, due in part to the frightened expression on Liberty's face, while the chain device on the reverse (adopted from the earlier Fugio design) struck many as a symbol of slavery, unfit for the citizens of a new, free nation. The fact that the designer misjudged his spacing and had to abbreviate AMERICA AMER. on his first attempt did not escape censure, either, and even his second effort, seen here, was not popular.

The chain cent dates from early 1793. By that April, Voigt had abandoned his die cutting activities, and a new designer would be given his opportunity. This man was probably Adam Eckfeldt, who was also responsible for the first half cent.

UNITED STATES Cent, 1793

The second major class of 1793 cents is called the "wreath" variety, due to the replacement of Voigt's chain with a wreath of two curving branches of laurel. This type of cent was probably designed by Adam Eckfeldt, and it made its first appearance in April 1793. Like the chain cents, the wreath cents sported an ornamented edge, consisting of alternate strips of vertical lines and slender vines with leaves. An early alternate name for these coins was "vine and bars" cents. A few wreath cents, done late in the series, bear a new edge device, the inscription ONE HUNDRED FOR A DOLLAR. Our cents continued to have lettered edges until the latter part of 1795.

One of the cents on this slide has been chosen for its condition, the other for its great rarity. The coin at the left, sometimes called the most beautiful of wreath cents, is miraculously preserved, almost as fresh as the day it was minted. And exactly three examples of the second, worn coin are now known. This is the famed "Strawberry Leaf" cent, so called because of the small spray of trefoil leaves, observable just above the date.

UNITED STATES

Cent, 1793

Wreath cents were struck through the middle months of 1793. That September, the third, and perhaps the most attractive type of 1793 cent came into being. This "Liberty cap" variety, named for the Liberty cap on pole which appears behind Liberty's head, was inspired by the French *Libertas Americana* medal of the 1780s. Its designer was almost certainly Joseph Wright, who was a casualty of the yellow fever which plagued early operations at the Mint. He probably came to work there in August 1793, and he seems to have caught the fever and died during the following month. Wright's work lives on in the guise of these beautiful copper coins, and his basic designs would be followed for cents in 1794, 1795, and part of 1796 as well.

UNITED STATES

Cents, 1795

Early American copper coins have a “handmade” quality about them. They were struck by hand or by the next thing to it, the manually operated screw press. And each die had to be made by hand; there was no machine in the United States powerful enough to mass-produce coin dies. Indeed, the process—today called *hubbing*—had not even been invented at the time.

Ideally, a large punch with a Liberty head would be used to place an outline of the central design on an obverse die, while a punch shaped like a wreath would be used for the reverse. These designs were then tooled by hand, and the words and date appearing on the dies would be added, letter by letter, digit by digit.

Naturally, this led to a good deal of variation from one die to another which is part of the charm of early American coppers. Illustrated are three varieties of the 1795 cent. The one on the left is called the “Jefferson Head,” and it was probably done outside the Mint. The one on the right is called the “Hyphen” variety, due to a small, hyphen-like break between the R and T of LIBERTY. Below these two coins, we see the “Free Date” variety, so called because the 5 of the 1795 is nearly free of the bust, unlike several other cents of that date.

UNITED STATES Cent, 1796

The year 1796 saw further evolution in the design of the cent. Joseph Wright's Liberty cap concept, adopted late in 1793, had then carried over for 1794 issues. Slightly modified in 1795 by John Smith Gardner, it continued to serve us through part of 1796.

Later that year, a completely new design was adopted for the obverse, while only minor changes took place on the reverse. The new obverse design featured a draped bust of Liberty, while the Liberty cap disappeared. (One feels that the use of the cap on the cent, which happened to be a symbol of Republican France, may have distressed some people. By 1796, Franco-American tensions were growing; by 1798, we would be fighting an undeclared naval war with that country.)

Robert Scot was responsible for these design changes, which remained in effect through 1807.

EARLY MINT ERRORS: Cents, 1798, 1800

The early Philadelphia Mint labored under many hardships. Machinery was antiquated or homemade, and it broke down with annoying regularity. Most Mint workmen were novices, new to the coining process and its special demands. Congress was not certain whether the Mint should even exist, and it debated the point throughout the 1790s, damaging employee morale. And yellow fever made a visit to Philadelphia each summer, prompting frequent closure of the facility.

Faced with these problems, it is perhaps understandable that the Mint did not strike every coin perfectly. Illustrated here are three early misstruck cents: these and other sorts of errors were an everyday occurrence.

The reverse image 1798 cent is a *brockage*, caused when a fresh planchet was accidentally placed atop an already-struck cent which had not been ejected from the press. The second 1798 coin was simply struck off-center, although spectacularly so. And the 1800 coin is a "flip-over double strike." The piece was struck, flipped over, and struck again.

UNITED STATES

Cents, 1799, 1804, 1804 "restrike"

Many of the early federal coppers are quite rare. An epidemic of yellow fever limited cent production in 1799; specimens bearing that date have always been eagerly prized. The issues of 1804 were also very limited (total issued for 1799 *and* 1804 being somewhere around fifteen hundred dollars' worth of coins). These dates, then, are seen as being "key" coins in any cent collection.

They were held thus as early as 1860. Somewhere around that year, a fake 1804 (the so-called "restrike" illustrated below the original) was manufactured outside the Mint to satisfy collector demand. A rusty 1803 obverse die was found, the 3 was altered to a 4, and this "rare" die was married to a reverse die from the year 1820—which featured a totally different wreath than that employed on the original reverse die of 1804. It is unlikely that the "restrike" 1804 made from these dies fooled anyone, but it did fill a gap in most collections, and it is still included by courtesy in the early copper series.

UNITED STATES Cent, 1808

The designs for the cent were changed once again in 1808, when John Reich's "classic head" designs were introduced. Liberty now faces left, her curls piled atop her head. This arrangement has led to a second name for the new design, the "turban head." For the reverse, the double-sprayed wreath was replaced by a single, circular branch of laurel, tied at the bottom.

Coins of the classic head design were struck through 1814. In general, they are the most difficult cents to procure in excellent condition, a phenomenon attributed to the purity—and hence the softness—of the copper planchets used for their manufacture. Since the Mint was apparently getting its planchets from the same source (Boulton & Watt, of Birmingham, England) as it had been using since the late 1790s, this theory may be incorrect. Many other American coins around 1810 exhibit the same softness of detail seen on the classic head cents: the lack of detail on average specimens in the latter series may simply be attributable to poor Mint practices and lack of quality control.

UNITED STATES Cent, 1816

No cents were struck bearing the date 1815. Throughout the long history of this American coin, 1815 is the only year missing from its roster. But late in 1815, cents *were* struck, all the same. They bore a new date, that of 1816. And they also bore a new design.

This was the famed "coronet head," the product of Robert Scot. Liberty's head still faces left, but is altogether cruder—and homlier—than that found on any previous issue. The poor appearance of the design is sometimes attributed to the failing eyesight of its elderly engraver.

Ugly or not, this is the most common of the various large cent designs. Coins bearing Scot's coronet head were struck virtually unchanged down to 1835. Improved and refined in the late 1830s and early 1840s, the left-facing Liberty would continue to appear on copper cents until the end of the series in 1857.

Scot had continued Reich's reverse laurel wreath design for the 1816 cent. This concept, too, would grace the coin until the end of the series.

UNITED STATES

Cents, 1825, 1841, 1857

Changes in the obverse depiction of Liberty during the final three decades of the large cent are illustrated here. These coins are also indicative of the best work of which the Mint was capable at each period—all are “proofs.”

Proof or specimen coins are struck under far more demanding conditions than normal coins, also called “business strikes.” Dies are brightly polished, as are planchets. The coins are struck several times, rather than just once. This is done in order to achieve maximum clarity and relief in the designs. American proofs before 1860 are rare, and these proof cents are among the most elusive of all federal issues. The mint produced five of these 1825 proof cents, perhaps two dozen of the 1841s, and about eighty of the 1857s—the last date for the large cent series itself.

UNITED STATES

Half cent, 1793

The first members of what proved to be an interrupted and less-than-popular series emerged from the new Philadelphia Mint in the middle of 1793. The designer is not known with certainty, but the two people most frequently considered are Joseph Wright and Adam Eckfeldt. The obverse design features a left-facing head of Liberty (with Liberty cap on a pole, to make certain that no one was in the dark as to her identity). The reverse featured the value in a simple wreath, with the fraction $1/200$ beneath.

In terms of general design, this first half cent copied features found on the cent, including a lettered edge giving the coin's value: TWO HUNDRED FOR A DOLLAR. In all, some 35,334 1793 half cents were struck. Most in existence today are extremely worn, indicating a prolonged circulation.

UNITED STATES

Half cents, 1794, 1795

For half cents of 1794, a design was adopted which was a virtual copy of that seen on the cent. Liberty's head was now turned to the right, a position it would retain until 1809. The designer of this second half cent variety was probably Robert Scot, who was appointed Engraver of the Mint late in 1793. All 1794 half cents have the lettered edge as on the 1793s.

The issues of 1795 generally parallel those for 1794, with one notable exception. Late in the year, the official weight of the coin was reduced from 104 to 84 grains. This resulted in a thinner planchet, which rendered edge-marking impractical. As with the cent, 1795 half cents are known with both lettered and plain edges.

UNITED STATES

Half cent, 1805

In many ways, the half cent was the stepchild among early American copper coins. It was struck when there was nothing more important to do at our early Mint. It was only struck sporadically, unlike the cent. It was sometimes struck on defective, "recycled" planchets, originally intended for other coins. And, while its designs tended to mimic those found on the cents, the half cent only got them years after they had first appeared on its larger cousins.

This 1805 half cent is a case in point. A draped bust of Liberty first appeared on the cent in 1796, the work of designer Robert Scot. Scot's concepts were translated to the half cent, but not until 1800. Over 800,000 1805 half cents were made; this would be considered a miniscule amount today, but it is the third-highest mintage recorded for the half cent over its entire 64-year career.

UNITED STATES

Half cent, 1809

In 1809, the first half cents appeared with new obverse and reverse designs, the work of John Reich. Typically, these designs featuring a "turban head" and a single-spray wreath had appeared on cents somewhat earlier. Just as typically, the "turban" or "classic" head design was retained for half cents long after it had been abandoned for cents. For the latter, a new design emerged in 1816; the half cent had to wait until 1840. Here as in so many other instances, one feels that the Mint considered the half cent a supremely unimportant coin, for whose design and manufacture almost anything would do.

UNITED STATES

Half cents, 1831, 1836

Half cents with the John Reich "classic head" design were struck intermittently from 1809 to 1836. The first year of issue was the largest, just over one million coins. Figures dropped sharply for 1810 and 1811, and no further half cents were made until 1825. They were then struck in some quantity in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

The two coins illustrated were part of no such series however; no half cents were struck for circulation in either 1831 or 1836. The 1831-dated coin is known from about 15 specimens while that dated 1836 is one of about 25 known today. All of the 1836s exist as proofs but these fall into two categories: "originals" made near the date indicated, and "restrikes" made in the 1840s or even later. Originals such as this example are the rarer of the two varieties.

UNITED STATES

Half cents, 1849

By the late 1840s there was a small but growing number of coin collectors in the United States. Quite naturally, many of them were primarily interested in the coinage of their own country—the first books devoted to American coins date from this period. Just as naturally, the Mint acted in response to increased collector interest—the production of proof coins increased.

A good deal of the Mint's attention to producing "special" coins centered on the lowly half cent, which enjoyed little popularity with the average citizen. No regular half cents were struck during most of the 1840s, but proof issues exist for each year.

The coin on the left formed part of a proof issue in 1849. For comparison purposes, the reverse of a regular 1849 half cent is included. Note the high "wire edge," plainly seen at the top of the obverse: many of the Mint's early proof attempts bear this feature, evidence of the multiple strikes needed to produce the high relief proof effect. Approximately ten of these coins exist. About 40,000 normal (or business) half cents were coined in 1849.

HARD TIMES TOKENS

All c. 1837

In the late 1830s, the booming American economy, feverish with land speculation, suffered a panic and a depression. Business took a sudden and spectacular turn for the worse in 1837; not until around 1844 would the economy recover.

In bad times, people tend to hoard coins. And so they did in the late 1830s: gold and silver left circulation first, and copper coins soon began following suit. The ensuing monetary shortage led to the issue of private copper tokens, such as the ones illustrated here. Some were consciously modelled on the cent, as far as design was concerned. Others bore a political or satirical content: President Andrew Jackson (who was widely perceived as being responsible for the financial crisis) was savagely lampooned on many tokens. We see him here in a strong box, brandishing a cutlass.

Most Hard Times tokens were intended to pass as cents, although a few the size of the half cent also circulated. The smaller piece on the left is one such token.

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